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ABSTRACT

Criticism is the art of disclosing the qualities of events or objects the connoisseur perceives. Criticism is not negative appraisal, nor a list of unfavorable judgements; its essence is illumination. The key characteristics of criticism used as an evaluation method are: (1) inherent subjectivity; (2) reliance on the perception of the critic (its quality is a function of that person's ability); (3) descriptive, interpretative, and evaluative qualities; and (4) intent to educate others so that their appreciation and understanding of the critiqued work will be enhanced. Criticism techniques should be used when: (1) the purpose of the study is to convey to others the nature and qualities of a program or a set of materials; (2) an expert opinion can illuminate and educate others about the program; (3) the intent of the evaluation is to discover what the program is, how it is what it is, rather than what it does; and (4) a subjective and qualitative appraisal of a program is satisfactory. (JAZ)

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EVALUATION GUIDES

Guide Number 18

CRITICISM AND ITS USE IN EVALUATION

Mark St. John

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The use of criticism as an evaluation method is discussed, including

- Introduction
- The Critic as a Guide
- The Nature of Criticism
- Educational Criticism
- The Techniques of the Critic
- References

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> The function of criticism should be to show how a work is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.
>
> Susan Sontag

> I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing,
> than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.
>
> e. e. cummings

INTRODUCTION

As a brief introduction to using criticism methods in evaluation, following are brief lists of (a) the key characteristics of criticism, and (b) hints about when to use the techniques of criticism.

Key characteristics of criticism include the following; criticism

- is inherently subjective;
- relies on the perception of the critic, and its quality is a function of that person's ability;
- is descriptive, interpretative, and evaluative;
- aims to educate others so that their appreciation and understanding of the critiqued work will be enhanced.

Use the techniques of criticism when

- the purpose of the study is to convey to others the nature and qualities of a program or a set of materials;
- an expert or connoisseur opinion can illuminate and educate others about the program;
- the intent of the evaluation is to discover what the program is, how it is what it is, rather than what it does;
- a subjective and qualitative appraisal of a program is satisfactory.

THE CRITIC AS A GUIDE

In The Ascent of Man, Jacob Bronowski, scientist, mathematician, and philosopher, guides all those who will follow over an unfamiliar landscape. Speaking to the common man, he gently works his way through the history of science and technology, pausing to examine in detail pivotal times, events, people, and ideas. In describing the invention of the Pythagorean theorem, or Einstein's ponderings about relativity, it would have been easy to lose the interest of all but the most ardent science enthusiasts. Yet, Bronowski managed to produce one of the most popular television science series of all times.

Bronowski manages to illuminate the most difficult ideas in science in an intriguing, even poetic, fashion. Articulate, facile, and clearly at home as he talks about the great scientists of the past, he helps his listeners to see the brilliance of their insights, to appreciate the subtleness of their theories, and to recognize the deeper implications of their work.

More importantly, Bronowski loves science. He is proud to be a scientist. It is obvious that he relishes the intellectual struggle that is at the heart of doing good science. His intensity and earnestness move his listeners as much as his intelligence.

Bronowski is a great critic.

THE NATURE OF CRITICISM

> The end of criticism is the re-education of the perception of the work of art. The task of the critic is to lift the veils that keep the eyes from seeing.
>
> Dewey

Connoisseurship

Elliot Eisner, in his book The Educational Imagination (1979), describes connoisseurship in this way:

> To be a connoisseur is to know how to look, to see, and to appreciate. Connoisseurship, generally defined, is the art of appreciation. It is essential to criticism because, without the ability to perceive what is subtle

> and important, criticism is likely to be superficial or even empty. The major distinction between connoisseurship and criticism is this: connoisseurship is the art of appreciation, criticism is the art of disclosure. Connoisseurship is a private act; it consists of recognizing and appreciating the qualities of a particular, but it does not require either a public judgment or a public description of those qualities . . .

Connoisseurship comes from experience and attention. To be a connoisseur of wine, one must have had considerable experience in tasting wines and in being attentive at the time. Experience alone obviously does not make one a connoisseur (or else there would be a significant glut of wine connoisseurs). One has to learn what qualities exist, how they are sensed, and how they relate. One must have sensory benchmarks in memory--to remember how other great wines compare in these qualities.

One can be a connoisseur of anything--wine, science, music, film, old cars. . . Wine connoissuers have a trained and refined sense of taste and smell; music connoisseurs have trained ears; restaurant connoisseurs have both trained palates and are sensitive to ambiance and mood. Educational connoisseurs are sensitive to teaching and learning behaviors. Just as with music or art, educational connoisseurship results from a combination of experience and attention. Educational connoisseurs must have seen a wide range of educational settings, have observed students and teachers interacting, and have studied curricula and educational materials. From such experience, if attention is present, sensitivity can be gained.

Connoisseurs love what they know. Their sensitivity comes from their appreciation. Their learning is fired by their passion for their subject. Music connoisseurs like to listen to music; they think music is important to their lives; they believe in music. Similarly, educational connoisseurs must have a natural interest in education, in learning, in ideas, and in the development of people.

Criticism

> Criticism is the art of disclosing the qualities of events or objects the connoisseur perceives. Criticism is the public side of connoisseurship. One can be a connoisseur without the skills of criticism, but one cannot be a critic without the skills of connoisseurship.
>
> Eisner (1979)

Bronowski is both a connoisseur and a critic. He is both knowledgeable and articulate. He does what the critics of art, wine, and music do--he illuminates the whole field for us. He allows us to see for ourselves.

Criticism points out structures to us. It notes repetitive themes and makes patterns visible. It makes what might be originally an indistinguishable blur into a picture with distinguishable features. Our understanding of how a work is unique, how it gains its integrity and brilliance, is enhanced. Good criticism allows us to see deeper, to notice more, and to have quesions (more difficult questions) of our own. It brings us closer to the artist, and makes the artistic enterprise more real, familiar, and feasible.

Critics help us to see what is significant in a work. They share with us what they perceive. And their perceptions are a function of their concepts. That is, what they perceive depends upon how they look, which in turn depends upon their training and knowledge. Critics use constructs and theories to guide their vision. (The word theory, in fact, comes from the Greek word for theater--thus, a theory is a stage, a reference frame for viewing the world.) For example, the theories of Piaget may be used to help us understand a classroom where children are learning elementary science ideas, or the theories of social psychology may help the critic in showing us the important aspects of the class management techniques being used. Eisner explains in more detail how the educational critic chooses what to relate:

> What (educational) critics do or should try to do is not to translate what cannot be translated, but rather to create a rendering of a situation, event, or object that will provide pointers to those aspects of the situation, event, or object that are in some way significant. Now what counts as significant will depend upon the theories, models, and values (of the critic). But it will also depend on the purpose of the critic. For example, an educational critic focusing on the learning patterns of a particular student will attend to qualities and circumstances different from those he or she would attend if interested in the critical rendering of the character of classroom discourse, the qualities of the classroom's visual environment, or the meanings imbedded in the treatment of time in the classroom. The point here is straightforward: What is rendered by someone working as an educational critic will depend on his or her purposes as well as the kinds of maps, models, and theories being used.

To complete this general discussion of the nature of criticism, it may be useful to point out what criticism is <u>not</u>.

Criticism is not negative appraisal. It is not a list of unfavorable judgments. Rather, the essence of criticism (at least, as we are describing it in this guide) is illumination. Criticism involves description, interpretation, and evaluation. All criticism involves description, which hopefully aids us in seeing the work more clearly. Criticism also involves interpretation--which is usually based on some sort of theoretical framework. Finally, criticism may involve some degree of evaluative judgment, depending on the purpose of the evaluation. A critic who is writing for Consumer Reports may want to make all kinds of comparative judgments. (The critic may, in fact, be "critical".) On the other hand, there are many times that description and interpretation are enough. For example, the critic who is writing to enlighten visitors at an art gallery may want to make few comparisons or judgments.

Criticism is also not classification. Recognizing the age of a wine, the year of a painting, or the Piagetian stage of a child is not the aim of the critic. Good criticism relies on fresh perceptions which may be actually blocked by classification. The difference between classification and perception has become very clear to me in the pursuit of my hobby of bird watching. Mostly, I do not like organized bird-watching trips. The guides usually are skilled and knowledgeable, but they often offer little more than assistance with observation and classification. The trip becomes an endless series of sightings and classification. A friend of mine, Bill Clow, is a unique guide by contrast. Billy is a connoisseur of birds and a great critic of bird-watching. First, he is in love with his occupation--all of his energy goes into understanding and appreciating birds. And he shares that appreciation. His passion is obvious and infectious. He points out where birds live, and why; he mocks their calls; he explains their features; he talks with owls at night. With Billy, you do not just learn a taxonomy--you enter a whole new world.

An Example of Educational Criticism

One can easily find reviews of books and movies, but it is more difficult to find examples of educational criticism. The following passages, excerpted from an educational criticism by Elizabeth Vallance, are included in The Educational Imagination (Eisner, 1979). This particular section deals with the quality and types of intellectual discussions happening in Mr. Williams' classroom.

Mr. Williams: I wonder why the ocean never fills up if all these rivers keep flowing into it.

Jim: The ocean goes on and on--it never fills up. It's very big.

Sue: People take water out of it to drink, in reservoirs.

Mr. Williams (surprised): To drink it!?!

Jack: It evaporates and lotsa people use it to drink.

Mr. Williams: Water from the ocean?

Jack (flustered, correcting himself): Oh, no. It's salty. But it evaporates and then it rains. . .

In this discussion, Mr. Williams does not fully resolve the question by answering it precisely, making it possible for the chidren to continue to wonder about it. Additionally, he does not restate Jack's final point, perhaps forcing chidren to listen to one another if they are to enter the discussion. . . Leaving some questions unresolved may demonstrate that every time one wonders about something, one should not expect to find an answer. . .

Later Mr. Williams asks: What do you think the author had in mind when he wrote this scene? What was the difference between the world Mole lived in and the one Water Rat lived in? Do people live in different worlds?

Reading a phrase, he points out that the author of Wind in the Willows makes the river have life, describing it as an animal playing with leaves, chuckling.

Mr. Williams: Did you ever sit by a river?

Jim: It gurgles. (others murmur assent)

Mr. Williams: You can have a conversation with it.

Moving the questions among students skillfully, so all have a chance to answer in front of the class, Mr. Williams is not willing to accept just any answer. He may tell a student to reread a section, to find evidence, to clarify the meaning of what was said, to amplify an interpretation or to rethink a position. And he may sum up previous explanations before asking for more plausative alternatives. While this could conceivably deflate some children and prevent them from being able to respond to another question, in Mr. Williams' class, children do not seem to be particularly bruised by making mistakes in front of their peers and by being told their answers are wrong. . . It is a supportive group, they do not ridicule one another's mistakes, and Mr. Williams generally lets students know their answers are wrong in a matter-of-fact tone, not accusingly or sending messages that their answers are stupid. Another child reads a story and is trying to interpret a passage.

Mr. Williams: Why did Oswald say that his legs are younger than Grandpa's?

Holly: Because he is younger than Grandpa?

Mr. Williams: I think that there is more to it than that.

He communicates clearly, but without recrimination, that the answer is incomplete. there are, after all, right and wrong answers, complete and incomplete ones, and central and peripheral contributions to a discussion. It seems more honest and responsible to let children know that their answers are wrong in a supportive setting than to go along willy-nilly and accept any and all answers. . .

This example shows the major features of criticism. It is descriptive and interpetative. It is even, at times, evaluative. The critic's love of good teaching is apparent. The brief classroom discussions that are included illustrate themes that run throughout the class. Theories about psychological well-being and behavior lie behind the interpretations that are suggested. Meaning is extracted (or added) to very brief glimpses. This criticism is, as is all criticism, subjective. Even the bias of the critic for open-ended, probing, and less structured situations is apparent.

THE TECHNIQUES OF THE CRITIC

In this section of the guide, four specific working techniques of the critic are described. The techniques range from having direct and obvious correlates in program evaluation to only suggesting new and creative possibilities.

Accurate, Sharp, Appreciative Descriptions

In the film Amadeus, Saliere, an arch-rival of Mozart's, reflects jealously on the brilliance of Mozart's music. As he describes the unique structures and movements, the symphyony becomes audible in the background. Then Salieri's words are blended with the music, and he lovingly points out the entrance of each instrument, the novelty of its role, and its place in the whole of the symphony. He sighs, feeling each nuance of the music's mood, and he talks of Mozart, his life, and how the music is only a very honest, indeed ruthless, statement by Mozart of the way it is.

Salieri's description is itself a piece of art and a magnificent piece of criticism. The listener learns about the music, and about Mozart, but is also brought directly into contact with the transcending qualities of all music. The listener is uplifted by the experience.

This is a good example of an accurate, sharp, loving description. The example of educational criticism written by Elizabeth Vallance is another example. This technique intertwines the comments of the critic with the flow of the work itself, so that the listener can learn about the work as it is happening. Voice-overs on film, documentary narrators, and even sports commentators, all use this technique.

In the final example given below, Randall Jarrell (1965) uses this technique to comment on Robert Frost's dramatic poem, "Home Burial:"

He saw her from the bottom of the stairs
Before she saw him
(implies that, knowing herself seen, she would have acted differently)

She was staring down
looking back over her shoulder at some fear
(at some fear. . . not a specific feared object. . . Normally, we do not look back over our shoulder at what we leave, unless we feel for it something more than fear.)

She took a doubtful step
and then undid it
To raise herself and look again.
(A vertical ballet of indecision toward and away from a fearful, but mesmerically, attractive object, something hard to decide to leave, and easy to decide to return to. . . The surprising use of the word "undid" gives her withdrawal of the tentative step a surprising reality.)

And Jarrell shows how the style of the poem supports the mood of the work:

If you had any feelings, you that dug
with your own hand
(but after the three stabbing, indicting stresses of "your-own-hand," she breaks off the sentence. . . but the fact of things continues)

I saw you from that very window there
(the same stabbing stresses, the same emphasis of a specific damning actuality. . .)

You could sit there with the stains on your shoes
of the fresh earth from your own baby's grave
And talk about your everyday concerns
(The hissing or splitting s's together with the damning stresses and the judge's summing up give an awful finality to this condemnation. Later, she says that he lives by proverbs and he'll die by them. Now she turns on him and in breathless outrage.)

Think of it, talk like that at such a time!
(the repeated sounds of t, t, th, t, t are thoroughly expressive)

Jarrell is not following any set rules of criticism. He is simply getting into the work, staying close to what he hears and feels and sees. He is writing out a blow-by-blow description of the unseen, but richly emotional action, that surrounds the lean verses.

In an educational setting, this kind of description can be used to critique classroom interactions, teaching styles, and educational materials. Such a description will be only as insightful as the critic is sensitive and perceptive about educational issues.

Thematic Matrix Analysis

One of the critic's tasks is to find and point out the dominant themes or patterns that run through a work. Thematic matrix analysis is a procedure that critics use to dissect a work, to record the themes that are present, and to study how they interact.

A matrix is a two-dimensional array that shows interactions between two sets of data (the column and row variables). It is used as an exploratory tool, as well as a record keeping and display device. Matrices can be used to write down the way that themes or issues are used in a work. They are particularly good for charting dichotomies, and for comparing and contrasting polar issues.

Example:

The Evaluation of the Follow Through Program drew critiques from two evaluators--House and Stebbins. Their reports were independent and difficult to reconcile. The matrix on the following page pulls out the prominent themes or points where comparison is important.

Theme	House	Stebbins
1. The measures lack sensitivity to the unique outcomes of the different models	Agrees	Agrees
2. The proper unit of analysis is the classroom rather than the child	Agrees	Disagrees
3. Models emphasizing basic skills succeeded better than other models in helping children gain these skills	Agrees	Disagrees in text, not in summary
4. Program implementation was not assessed	Agrees	Agrees (implicitly)

Matrices can be used to decide whether a theme is really a theme. That is, when an idea or issue begins to appear before the evaluator repeatedly, it may be something the evaluator wishes to keep track of and document more fully. The following matrix can be used by an evaluator to keep track of recurring themes encountered in a qualitative evaluation.

Theme	Interview	Observation	Document
1. Participants are good peer teachers	F1.3 K3.7	55.2-56.0	
2. The goal of the workshop is not to improve teaching directly	G3.5	42.2 65.0	proposal 23.3

The themes, ideas, or issues of the program being studied are listed in the left-hand column. As participants mention these themes in interviews, they are noted on the chart. (All interviews are typed into transcripts and the pages labeled--thus F1.3 is three-tenths of the way down the first page of interview F.) When the same theme shows up in the field notes (a page numbered notebook), the location is noted in the appropriate cell of the matrix. Finally, when the issue appears in a document, questionnaire, or written materials, its occurrence is also noted.

With the advent of powerful microcomputer data based management systems, it should be possible to store and cross-reference a large amount of rich qualitative data.

Stream of Consciousness

In Virginia Wolfe's To the Lighthouse, the narrator of the story has almost completely vanished, and the reader sees instead of objective reality, only its reflection in the eyes and minds of the characters. To give precedence to the internal reality of consciousness over the external reality of facts and actions is a technique that authors and critics have used for good effect. This technique of viewing a scene--of not seeing it directly, but only seeing its reflections in the consciousness of those who are there--has the following characteristics:

1. Objective facts and actions are seen only as elements in the minds and eyes of the characters. Such subjective views of reality may be inconsistent, and they engage us in wondering about the nature of an "objective" reality which we cannot see for ourselves.

2. The reality of space and time may be violated in order to present a clear view of the inner reality. Thus, moments may expand and flashbacks may jump large gaps in space and time.

As an example, consider the description of a house given in To the Lighthouse:

> She looked up . . . and saw the room, saw the chairs, thought them fearfully shabby. Their entrails, as Andrew said the other day, were all over the floor; but then what was the point, she asked herself, of buying good chairs to let them spoil up here all through the winter when the house, with only one woman to see it, positively dripped with wet?

We see the house not "as it is" but only as it is in Mrs. Ramsey's eyes. We notices only what she notices. We learn not only about the house, but about Mrs. Ramsey.

For evaluators, the technique of focusing on the internal realities of the characters in the setting can be very illuminating. To describe a program, one can use the description of an "objective narrator" or one can present the program as it is reflected in the eyes of its students, teachers, administrators, and funders. The literary techniques exist for graphically illustrating the different program realities for each.

Discontinuities in Word and Image

Two film techniques are useful to the evaluator in making subtle critical commentary.

Lateral tracking is a technique where the camera scans a sequence of scenes that are not necessarily continuous in space or time, but are connected, perhaps subtly, by some theme. Thus, alternating scenes of poverty and opulence can make a powerful social commentary without any direct narrative. Similarly, a sequence of scenes of an educational program can, by itself, be an effective tool of criticism.

Another type of effective discontinuity is one between word and image. When program goal statements are displayed simultaneously with program realities, an illuminating discord or harmony can be shown.

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